

## W. Somerset Maugham and Mysticism

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[**Abstract:** This article explores Maugham's mysticism. Each of the three phases of Maugham's literary evolution has a philosophical base of its own. Mysticism grounds his third and his longest, his most creative and his most original phase. Accordingly it shapes his mature metaphysic and his permissive ethic, his expressive theory of art and his romantic theory of love. Mysticism entails his repudiation of individualism for universalism, his subordination of beauty to goodness as the supreme value. For all that, he is yet to be recognized as a mystic novelist.]

**Keywords:** Absolute, Spinozism, Transcendental self, Ecstasy, Goodness.

The basic oneness of the universe is not only the central characteristic of the mystical experience, but is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics. — Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*

... man is a kind of trinity composed of body, psyche and spirit. — Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*

Every good quality has its bad side, and nothing good can come into the world without at once producing a corresponding evil. — Carl G. Jung, *The Portable Jung*

Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all artists. — William Blake, *The Complete Writings of William Blake*

As his materialism underpins his naturalism, his subjective idealism his aestheticism, so does Maugham's absolute or objective idealism his mysticism. Central to both absolute idealism and mysticism is the word "Absolute". Maugham uses it in speaking of both, but leaves it undefined. Hence the necessity of beginning with Ewing's fairly comprehensive definition of this all-important term: "The Absolute is conceived as, strictly speaking, the whole of reality, so that it does not merely create

but includes in itself all material objects and human minds”. As a unitary cosmic consciousness, the Absolute is, Ewing further elaborates, coextensive with the consciousnesses of the finite minds. The double character of these minds lies in that, as members of the Absolute’s overarching consciousness, they “are radically different from what they are as experienced by themselves in their separateness” (*Idealism*, 403-404). As for absolute idealism’s relation to mysticism, Underhill calls it “natural mysticism” by way of emphasizing their shared philosophical position. She also points to the difference between them when she observes that “the Absolute of the metaphysicians remains a diagram — impersonal and unattainable — the Absolute of the mystics is lovable, attainable, alive” (24). To make the difference more explicit, she defines mysticism as “the science of union with the Absolute” and the mystic as “the person who attains to this union, not the person who talks about it” (72). In other words, the difference between absolute idealism and mysticism is the difference between theory and practice, between speculation and experience. Maugham himself illustrates this difference. As an idealist, he holds that, except for the given sense-data and the inferred other minds, the rest of human knowledge is just a mental construct. For the convenience of living, men have, he continues, pieced together their fragmentary knowledge, and made it into a picture of the world they live in. “This is the world of phenomena”, he concludes, “that they know. Reality is merely the hypothesis they have suggested as its occasion” (*The Summing Up*, 153). As for the Absolute, Maugham refused, at the height of his aesthete’s relativism in 1901, to entertain the very idea of it: “Before you talk to us of the End in Itself tell us what is the Absolute” (*A Writer’s Notebook*, 50). He, however, mellows by 1917 to the point of confessing that “I do not see how it is possible to refuse intellectual assent to certain theories of the Absolute”(WN, 122). As a matter of fact, his first use of the idea of the Absolute can be traced to *Of Human Bondage*, written between 1911 and 1914. Anyway reality is for the idealist Maugham a matter of hypothesis, the Absolute a persuasive concept. For the mystic Maugham, things are, however, otherwise. First, he defines mysticism as a self-validating, intuitive experience. Second “[i]t is the feeling that the world we live in is but part of a spiritual universe and from this gains its significance; it is the sense of a present God who supports and comforts us” (*SU*, 159-160). In one ecstasy, he seems to feel “the presence of God” (*SU*, 160); in another, “to hear the noiseless footfall of the infinite” (*WN*, 230). Evidently it is the experience of ecstasy that makes all the difference between the speculative

absolutist and the empirical mystic. Since Maugham's mysticism hinges on his Spinozism, it demands some attention at this point.

Maugham is as reluctant to acknowledge his debt to Schopenhauer as he is eager to do so to Spinoza. Momentous must have been his first encounter with the Portuguese philosopher to enthuse him so much: "I look upon my first reading of Spinoza as one of the signal experiences of my life. It filled me with just that feeling of majesty and exulting power that one has at the sight of a great mountain range" (*SU*, 142). Maugham's avowed Spinozism dates right from *The Hero* (1901), and persists right up to *The Razor's Edge* (1944). It is indeed too pervasive to be pinpointed. No wonder Maugham records in *A Writer's Notebook* at the age of seventy that Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus and Spinoza, Bradley and Whitehead never cease to entertain him and incite him to reflection (285). That Spinoza is the foremost among his philosophical heroes is manifest from his list of immortals: "Dante, Titian, Shakespeare, Spinoza" (*SU*, 182). No less handsome is Maugham's indirect tribute to his mentor. He names his first major novel *Of Human Bondage* (1915) with a phrase from Spinoza's *Ethics*. Moreover his autobiographical hero Philip simply raves about the philosopher. Thus "Spinoza filled him with awe, he had never before come in contact with a mind so noble, so unapproachable and austere; it reminded him of that statue by Rodin, *L'Age d'Airain*, which he passionately admired" (*Of Human Bondage*, 393). The most philosophical of all Maugham's heroes, Larry quite expectedly waxes eloquent on Spinoza:

I've been reading Spinoza the last month or two. I don't suppose I understand very much of it yet, but it fills me with exultation. It's like landing from your plane on a great plateau in the mountains. Solitude, and an air so pure that it goes to your head like wine and you feel like a million dollars. (*The Razor's Edge*, 64)

Maugham's extravagant praise for Spinoza indicates his discovery of a philosopher congenial to his taste and helpful to his own philosophical project.

The exposition of Spinoza's ideas below is strictly geared to Maugham's use of them. Equivalent of the idealist's Absolute, Spinoza's "substance" is self-caused, infinite, eternal. It has God

and Nature as its two synonyms, thought (mind) and extension (matter) as two of its innumerable attributes. It modifies into all particular things, and so inheres in them. As the cause of its modes and also as their container and sustainer, substance is immanent in the world. But since most of its attributes operate outside the world, it is transcendent as well. Spinoza would by this token seem to be more of a monist than a pantheist. Anyway men like all other things are modes of substance/Nature and also of its attributes of mind and matter. Accordingly “we are a part of the whole of Nature, whose order we follow”(Spinoza, *Ethics*, 286). The same conviction informs Maugham’s ethics: “The study of Ethics is part and parcel of the study of Nature; for man must learn his place in the world before he can act rightly and reasonably” (*WN*, 57). Schopenhauer too holds that “man is nature herself” (*WWR II*, 276). Intriguing are the relations between Spinoza’s God and his attributes. He premises that “all the attributes that [substance] has were always in it at the same time and one could not be produced by another”. Besides, each one of the attributes expresses the reality or being of substance and “a certain eternal and infinite essence” (*Ethics*, 81). For all that, substance alone is the absolute; the attributes are subservient. That thought is an attribute of God is orthodoxy. What, however, is heretical is Spinoza’s thesis that “God is an extended thing”. Since “all things are in God”, he does not know “why matter should be unworthy of the divine nature”( *Ethics*, 115, 89). As God’s attribute, matter like thought necessarily enjoys divinity, eternity and infinity. Accordingly Maugham’s protagonist of *The Hero* (1901) first proclaims “the flesh” to be “divine” (277) and then to be “certainly immortal” (336).

Spinoza’s theory of mind-matter relations is both original and intricate. He insists that each of the attributes must be conceived through itself, and that all of them exist in substance simultaneously. The attributes therefore function as discrete correlates. Hence Parkinson concludes that “Spinoza would reject the view that everything is really matter (mind being in some sense material) and also the view that everything is really mind (matter being in some sense mind)” (Editor’s Introduction to *Ethics*, 18). Spinoza is credited with panpsychism for his belief that all “individuals, ... are animated, although in different degrees” (*Ethics*, 125). Since thought and extension express the essence of the same substance, they are in effect its parallel manifestations. So Spinoza generalizes that “thinking substance and extended substance is one and the same substance, which is understood now under this and now under that attribute” (*Ethics*, 118). The only theory of “the relations between matter and spirit” that Maugham considers “satisfactory is Spinoza’s conception that substance thinking and substance

extended are one and the same substance” (*SU*, 154). A self-confessed Spinozist, Schopenhauer too asserts that “*the intellect and matter are correlatives, ... They are in fact really one and the same thing, considered from two opposite points of view*” (*WWR II*, 15-16). The relations between substance, thought and extension prefigure those between man, mind and body. The human mind is, on Spinoza’s theory, the idea of the human body. The mind knows immediately whatever happens within the body; mediately, without it. Inasmuch as “the human mind is united to the body” (*Ethics*, 125), a human being is a composite entity. The mind and the body act together and at the same time, they manifest thereby the agent’s essence. Accordingly as in the case of substance, so in the case of a human being too, “the mind and the body is one and the same thing which is conceived now under the attribute of thought and now under the attribute of extension” (*Ethics*, 166). A faithful Spinozist that he is, the protagonist of *The Hero* once again echoes the philosopher: “The soul and the body are one, indissoluble. Soul is body, and body is soul” (208).

Spinoza’s “substance” changes in Maugham’s contemporary vocabulary into “energy”, and functions as his absolute. This energy is “a neutral stuff which is the raw material of the mental and physical worlds” (*SU*, 154). It may not be a coincidence that all Maugham’s philosophical influences are invariably monists with a near-identical metaphysics. Thus Schopenhauer’s absolute, “the thing-in-itself”, is the “will”. And “the will underlies both spirit and bodily phenomena” (*Parerga I*, 229). For the ultimate monist that Shankar is, the Atman, the transcendental self, is identical with Brahman, the absolute. The infinite, indivisible “Atman” is, Shankar asserts, “the ground of all things animate or inanimate” (103). It is “separate from the body, the senses, the vital energy, the mind and ego” (113). Implicit is the assumption that mind and body sublate in the absolute. The trinity of body, mind and the absolute is the thematic dialectic recurring in all Maugham’s mystical novels from *Of Human Bondage* to *The Razor’s Edge*.

Spinoza discusses some of the important aspects of “substance” under the synonym of God. Though material, his God is absolutely impersonal. He objects to the idea of a personal God “consisting of body and mind, and as subject to passions” (*Ethics*, 86) on the grounds that it conflicts divine infinity. The agnostic Maugham too very often uses “God” as a synonym for “the Absolute” or “Reality”. His “God”, however, is Spinoza’s impersonal God. So he is opposed to the idea of

reconciling “in one conception the Absolute of the metaphysician with the God of the Christian” (*WN*, 123). In Spinoza’s metaphysics, all things proceed from the divine nature with a certain eternal necessity and with supreme perfection. So he vetoes any idea of divine purpose. “If God acts on account of an end”, he argues, “he necessarily desires something which he lacks” (*Ethics*, 109). Moreover Spinoza dismisses all idea of purpose as a human invention. Maugham too denies, life, love, art, good and evil any purpose whatsoever. As for the relations between God and man, Spinoza denies him “the being of substance”, but grants him “the nature of God in a certain and determinate way” (*Ethics*, 121). Thus Spinoza and the absolute idealists have more or less the same view about the relation between the Absolute and man. As a matter of fact, Spinoza anticipates in many ways the absolute idealists. No wonder William James thinks that “Spinoza was the first great absolutist” (*The Writings*, 498).

Now to conclude with Maugham’s more obvious borrowings from Spinoza. He identifies “the substance” from which man has ultimately evolved as “energy”. This primordial energy must have generated the “psychophysical stuff in which is the germ of life” (*WN*, 287). He then invokes Spinoza’s theory of conatus to justify his resolution to make the best use of his life:

Here it is not that I speak, it is the craving within me, which is in every man, to persevere in my own being; it is the egoism that we all inherit from that remote energy which in the unplumbed past first set the ball rolling; it is the need of self-assertion which is in every living thing and which keeps it alive. It is the very essence of man. Its satisfaction is the self-satisfaction which Spinoza has told us is the highest thing for which we can hope, ‘for no one endeavours to preserve his being for the sake of any end’. (*SU*, 163-164)

He also makes his own Spinoza’s maxim that “a free man thinks of nothing less than of death” (*SU*, 172). He, however, dissents from the mentor on a number of issues. A champion of virtue-ethics, Maugham sets enormous store by pity and sympathy as expressive of goodness. He therefore feels shocked at Spinoza’s view that pity is womanish. He would also like to add to Spinoza’s belief in man’s innate egoism a countervailing belief in man’s innate altruism. For he contends that “it is not so

rare for a man to lay down his life for his friend” (*Ten Novels*, 281). Maugham also sets his face against Spinoza’s rationalism, his optimism and his inadequate sense of life’s evils.

Maugham has a compelling reason for marking off his brand of secular mysticism from its religious counterpart. First he shies away as a confirmed agnostic from the idea of a personal God. He acts “as though God did not exist” (*SU*, 161). On the contrary, a Christian takes the existence of a personal God for granted. Second Maugham rejects the Christian conception of the soul as a “simple spiritual substance created by God and immortal”. Instead he means by it his personality, “composed of my thoughts, my feelings, my experiences and the accidents of my body” (*WN*, 288). Evidently Maugham extirpates anything divine or supernatural from the soul. Conversely Underhill, a celebrated exponent of Catholic mysticism, prizes the “divine nucleus, the point of contact between man’s life and the divine life” (54). As a compulsive monist, Maugham accepts Spinoza’s view about the divinity and immortality of the body. In pointed contrast, Underhill firmly holds that “[o]ur bodies are animal things, made for animal activities” (61). Another Catholic student of mysticism, however, thinks otherwise. Responding to Richard Jefferies’s “mysticism of soul *and* body”, Zaehner observes:

By his emphasis on the worthiness of the body as well as the soul, Jefferies stands nearer to orthodox Christian tradition than do many of the Christian mystics themselves whose excessive mortification of the body stems rather from the hidden residue of Manichaeism which has been the curse of post-Augustinian Christianity, rather than from the risen Christ. (49)

Presumably it is Maugham’s Spinozist view of the body’s divinity and immortality that is at the root of his conviction that the mystical experience may arise through the influence of a drug, opium or the mescal bean (*Vagrant Mood*, 83-84). Further additions to his list of triggers for ecstasy are a glass of cold beer, the sight of a well-remembered scene, love and an artist’s excitement of creation (*Don Fernando*, 125). Believing as he does that mysticism is neither necessarily religious nor religious mysticism is better, he naturally feels that “Catholic mysticism demands a belief in certain affirmations that many of us find it impossible to accept” (*Don Fernando*, 125). There is nothing eccentric about Maugham’s position. Stace for one maintains that it is not true that “every mystic is a believer in some

one or other of the organized religions of the world” (*Mysticism and Philosophy*, 38-39). A similar idea is at the basis of William James’s statement that “religious mysticism is only half of mysticism” (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 417).

Of his own natural mystical experience, Zaehner says:

it came wholly unheralded and no stimulants of any kind were involved. I know now that it was a case of what is usually called a ‘natural mystical experience’ which may occur to anyone, whatever his religious faith or lack of it and whatever moral, immoral, or amoral life he may be leading at the time. (xiii)

This is literally true of Maugham and of the majority of his secular, ecstatic characters. The doctrinal and other differences between Maugham’s secular and religious mysticism, however, do not go beyond the surface to impact their essential identity. Thus Maugham agrees with the religious mystic that “rapture was worthless unless it strengthened the character and rendered man more capable of right action” (*SU*, 178). Undercutting all their differences, the various kinds of mysticism have a common nuclear core. In Stace’s formulation, it runs as follows:

What is common to all of them is the assertion that there is a kind of experience, a way of experiencing the world, in which all distinctions between one thing and another, including the distinction between the subject and object, self and not-self, are abolished, overcome, transcended, so that all the *different* things in the world become one, become identical with one another. (*Religion and the Modern World*, 239-240)

Russell advances the same thesis as the foundation of “pantheism in religion and monism in philosophy” (*Mysticism and Logic*, 18). Be that as it may, Maugham’s secular mysticism invites a psychological rather than a theological approach.



James treats mysticism in his universally popular *Varieties of Religious Experience* in terms of both psychology and theology. That Maugham takes pains to annotate it evidences his absorbing interest in the book and in its content. One instance of his direct borrowing from it stands out. On James's view, the religious life believes that "the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance" (*Varieties*, 475). And Maugham defines mysticism as "the feeling that the world we live in is but part of a spiritual universe and from this gains its significance; it is the sense of a present God who supports and comforts us" (*SU*, 160). Maugham's admiration for James is manifest in other ways too. A character in *The Explorer* (1907) takes up two books: one is by Nietzsche; "the other was a volume of Mrs. Crowley's compatriot, William James" (19-20). The hero Larry in *The Razor's Edge* (1944) pores over a tome for hours on end. The inquisitive narrator Maugham "looked at it and saw it was William James's *Principles of Psychology*" (no italics in original). He remarks that "it is a standard work important in the history of the science with which it deals; it is moreover exceedingly readable" (29). Of more significance is James's pervasive influence on Maugham's mysticism.

Schopenhauer anticipates in more than one way James's exploration of mysticism. The omnipresence of the absolute (in contemporary terms of the elementary particles) makes "the inner essence in all things ... absolutely one and the same" (Schopenhauer, *WWR* II, 642). This makes for the identity of the macrocosm and the microcosm, of physical nature and human nature. Schopenhauer seizes on it to define mysticism as the "consciousness of the identity of one's own inner being with that of all things, or with the kernel of the world (*WWR* II, 613). "The kernel of the world" is evidently the absolute, which in his case is the "will". Schopenhauer absolutizes the "will" when he asseverates that "[t]he will itself, alone and by itself, endures; for it alone is unchangeable, indestructible, does not grow old, is not physical but metaphysical, does not belong to the phenomenal appearance, but to the thing itself that appears" (*WWR* II, 239). As for the nature of the will, "in itself it is without consciousness" (*WWR* II, 201). Jung first generalizes that "[w]henver the spirit of God is extruded from our human calculations, an unconscious substitute takes its place". He then remarks that "in Schopenhauer we find the unconscious will as the new definition of God" (*On the Nature of the Psyche*, 94). Schopenhauer thus creates the right matrix of the subsequent unconscious-based theory of mysticism such as William James's. He also pioneers Jung's theory of the collective unconscious with

his thesis that the brain with its “consciousness isolates human individuals”, but “the unconscious part, [...], is a common life of all” (*WWR II*, 326). Maugham’s intimate knowledge of Schopenhauer must have predisposed him towards James’s theory of mysticism.

James’s thesis is that man’s waking or rational consciousness is attuned to the material world, his subliminal consciousness to the spiritual world. A permeable and flexible boundary between the two planes of consciousness facilitates transaction on either side. Jung adds that “the unconscious processes stand in a compensatory relation to the conscious mind” (*The Portable Jung*, 126). Rational consciousness encompasses only a superficial layer of the psyche; subliminal consciousness the larger and deeper layer. With reason or intellect as its primary instrument, rational consciousness is mainly discursive. With the whole of man’s emotional and instinctive life as its province, subliminal consciousness is intuitive. This consciousness is the source of man’s idiocy and genius, of superstition and inspiration, of eccentricity and creativity. It is the domain of all potentials and of things unrecorded or unobserved. It contains every kind of matter: “‘seraph and snake’ abide there side by side” (*The Varieties*, 417). “The specific virtues and vices of humanity are”, says Jung in corroboration, “contained in the collective psyche like everything else” (*The Portable Jung*, 96). A cardinal point of the Jamesian theory of mysticism is that the subliminal region is the fount of all mystical experience. Naturally he calls it “the mystical region, or the supernatural region” (*The Varieties*, 506). Conceiving as he does the best and the worst in man as co-present, he concludes that “the classic mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal or transmarginal region” (*The Varieties*, 417).

Space and time constitute what is known as the principle of individuation. “For it is only by means of time and space”, theorizes Schopenhauer, “that something which is one and the same according to its nature and the concept appears as different, as a plurality of coexistent and successive things” (*WWR I*, 113). Polarity between subject and object, between the separative empirical ego and the unitive absolute or transcendental self further adds to spatio-temporal divisiveness. In consequence, everything in the phenomenal world bears the curse of self-contradiction. The peculiar genius of ecstasy as the supreme mystical experience lies in its all-embracing unity. For ecstasy results, on James’s theory, from the “‘uprush’ into the ordinary consciousness of energies originating in the

subliminal parts of the mind”, from “an explosion, into the fields of ordinary consciousness, of ideas elaborated outside of those fields in subliminal region of the mind”, or from “invasion from the subconscious region” (*The Varieties*, 229, 230 and 503). What buttresses James’s theory of ecstasy as a dissolvent of all dualities is his own experience of it:

The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but one of the species, the nobler and better one, is itself the genus and so soaks up and absorbs the opposite into itself. (*The Varieties*, 379).

Ecstasy first liberates the ecstatic from his normal bondage to space and time, to individuality and multiplicity. It also marks the replacement of his empirical ego by his transcendental self. Its crowning moment sees the fusion of subject and object and the emergence of an ineffable sense of oneness. Since at the climactic moment the duality between the ecstatic subject and the transcendental object vanishes, ecstasy has no intellectual content but only a kind of illumination. The emergent mystical vision, captured by Happold, has the following as its hallmarks: “the vision of Oneness, the vision of Timelessness, the vision of a Self other than the empirical self, and the vision of a Love enfolding everything that exists” (119). The antinomic unconscious, however, is the birthplace of both good and evil. It is the habitat of man’s “most animal instincts” and “his most spiritual intuitions”, “the ‘ape and tiger’, ‘and the soul’” (Underhill, 52). Accordingly there is a life-negating “diabolical mysticism” (*The Varieties*, 417) in contrast to a life-furthering positive mysticism. Ecstasy is a form of self-transcendence. Huxley differentiates it into positive upward self-transcendence, negative downward self-transcendence and neutral horizontal self-transcendence (*The Devils of Loudun*, 361-375). Ecstasy in all its forms recurs in Maugham’s mystical novels.

“In mystic states” James asserts, “we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness” (*The Varieties*, 410). It is this experiential aspect of the Absolute that needs to be spelt out. As a starter are the over-beliefs, both philosophical and theological, encrusting the Absolute. Pantheism explains the ecstatic self-transcendence as “the merging of the narrower private self into the

wider or greater self, the spirit of the universe (which is your own ‘subconscious’ self”) (*The Varieties*, 109). Such other over-beliefs as mysticism, Vedantism and transcendental idealism all claim that “the finite self rejoins the absolute self, for it was always one with God and identical with the soul of the world” (*The Varieties*, 503). The point at issue is what the Absolute, stripped of all philosophical and theological trappings, boils down to. “The ‘more’ with which in religious experience”, James explains, “we feel ourselves connected is on its hither side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life” (*The Varieties*, 502). The religious feeling that man is guided by supernatural and higher powers appears vindicated by the fact that the influx from the subconscious self seems to the conscious self to be external and objective. James’s position comes through in his own over-belief, which includes belief in God’s existence. What happens in the phenomenon of “prayerful communion” is, on his view, that

certain kinds of incursion from the subconscious region take part in it, [...]. The appearance is that in this phenomenon something ideal, which in one sense is part of ourselves and in another sense is not ourselves, actually exerts an influence, raises our centre of personal energy, and produces regenerative effects unattainable in other ways. (*The Varieties*, 513)

For all practical purposes then, James’s “subconscious” substitutes for God or the Absolute. He speculates, for example, that the grace of God operates through the subliminal door. Jung too thinks that “[i]t is only through the psyche that we can establish that God acts upon us, but we are unable to distinguish whether these actions emanate from God or from the unconscious. We cannot tell whether God and the unconscious are two different entities” (*The Portable Jung*, 647-648).

Zaehner discerns in James’s “‘subliminal or transmarginal region’ [...] an adumbration of what Jung now calls the ‘collective unconscious’” (43). Arguably Jung’s collective unconscious would seem to be a stronger contender for the title of the Absolute than James’s “subconscious”. The collective unconscious is, according to Jung, “a timeless and universal psyche” (*The Portable Jung*, 38). It contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind’s evolution. It is also born anew in the brain structure of every individual. Embedded though in the psyche, the collective unconscious is so inscrutable and inexorable that it strikes the conscious self as an external force. Hence it is immanent-transcendent like

the Absolute. Theology would seem to converge on psychology in Otto's contention that "above and beyond our rational being lies hidden the ultimate and highest part of our nature, [...]. The mystics called it the basis or ground of the soul" (*The Idea of the Holy*, 50). Shankar's Atman too underlies "the states of waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep". And "the Atman within you is the Atman in all" (80 and 93).

Jung envisages the unconscious as the confluence of "all aspects of human nature — light and dark, beautiful and ugly, good and evil, profound and silly" ("*Approaching the Unconscious*", 94). It is the all-inclusiveness of the unconscious that accounts for its antinomy, which features in the Absolute as well. Both monism and pantheism consider the world as one unit of absolute fact. "On the monistic or pantheistic view", argues James, "evil, like everything else, must have its foundation in God" (*The Varieties*, 129). "The problem of evil", Maugham comments somewhat cryptically, "has always been a stumbling-block to monistic religions" (*Points of View*, 66). He does not, however, flinch from the consequences of his monism. Speaking for his creator, Larry in *The Razor's Edge* maintains that "when the Absolute manifested itself in the world evil was the natural correlation of good" (270). This is reminiscent of Godbole's reflections on the same issue in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*: "When evil occurs, it expresses the whole of the universe. Similarly when good occurs. [...] Good and evil are different as their names imply. But, in my humble opinion, they are both of them aspects of my Lord" (175). Paradox constitutes the very essence of mysticism. Hence Otto's generalization that "[t]he peculiar logic of mysticism is 'the identity of opposites' and the 'dialectic conceptions'" (*Mysticism*, 45).

Maugham's mysticism is best approached through his portrait of a psychoanalyst named Dr. Audline in his short story "Lord Mountdrago". Far from being bumptious, the doctor is so self-doubting that "it was only the outcome of his activities, patent to his most incredulous observer, that obliged him to admit that he had some faculty, coming from he knew not where, obscure and uncertain, that enabled him to do things for which he could offer no explanation" (*Collected Short Stories II*, 237). Evidently like a groping artist, the doctor works by his intuition. As a matter of fact, he stands out from his rationalist colleagues in being a thorough intuitionist. He knows all that Freud and Jung and the rest of them have written. He would have dismissed their theory as a farrago of half-truths but for

their professional success. His own abysmal failure to cure a challenging patient intensifies all the more his contempt for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis as such. It convinces him that “[h]e was dealing with dark and mysterious forces that it was perhaps beyond the powers of the human mind to understand” (255). At the story’s end, the doctor slips into a semi-mystical mood, and uses a distinctly mystical vocabulary: “With some kind of spiritual sense he seemed to envisage a bleak, a horrible void. The dark night of the soul engulfed him, and he felt a strange, primeval, terror of he knew not what” (256). Maugham thus lifts the human unconscious to the level of the numinous.

After James has dubbed the subconscious the mystical region, there is no surprise in Maugham’s view that “mysticism [...] seemed to dwell only just below the threshold of consciousness” (*Don Fernando*, 124). Quite consistent with this position is Maugham’s location of “the God of Christians” and “the Brahman of the Upanishads” in the “depth of the unconscious” (*WN*, 236). Both psychologists and mystics treat the unconscious as the abode of God as well the Devil. Accordingly Maugham seems to hear in Calderon’s mystical plays “the sinister drums of unseen powers” (*Don Fernando*, 72). Similarly, the poetry that appeals to “the subconscious” gives him “a strange primeval feeling” (*Introduction to Modern English and American Literature*, 322). Since the “subconscious” is the carrier of whatever is “primeval” in man, Maugham naturally situates good and evil in it.

Now that all the preliminaries are over, it is time to zero in on Maugham’s definition of the mystical experience which runs as follows:

The mystical experience is an awareness of a greater significance in the universe, “other than the known and above the unknown”, a dissolution of the self into a wider self; and this is accompanied by a great rush of vitality, a feeling of power, a sense of union with God or nature, and a strangely exhilarating feeling that depths upon depths of truth are within one’s grasp. It is an ecstasy. (*Don Fernando*, 125)

The phrase “a dissolution of the self into a wider self” evidently means the disappearance of the conscious self, under the impact of an overwhelming emotion, into the collective unconscious. Once the boundaries of the conscious self collapse, the immense psychic energy from the circumambient

unconscious flows in on the ecstatic who has nothing at the moment to sustain his separative empirical ego. Hence his unprecedented feeling of power and vitality, of freedom and unity, of noesis and euphoria. This interpretation chimes in with the claim that “ecstasy alone strikes through to the unconscious and subconscious, that is to say, to ‘the enduring facts of human nature and the universe’” (Lester, 161). Larry’s explanation of his own ecstasy is very much relevant here: “If I was for a moment one with the Absolute or if it was an inrush from the subconscious of an affinity with the universal spirit which is latent in all of us, I wouldn’t know” (*The Razor’s Edge*, 267). First it confirms Maugham’s acceptance of James’s psychological interpretation of ecstasy. Second it conflates the unconscious with the Absolute. Maugham confesses to having “dizzily followed Plotinus in his fight from the alone to the alone” (*SU*, 142). This supports his claim that ecstasy generates “a sense of awe and of detachment from all that is base, idle and transitory” (*Vagrant Mood*, 84).

The paradox at the heart of mysticism is that the one — the Absolute — causes the many, and that the many in their turn reduce to the one. The same collective unconscious, functioning as the absolute in all human beings, makes for their essential oneness. As for their superficial differences, they stem in part from their conscious selves and in part from their social positions. Anyway to realize the self’s oneness with the other is to glow with that selfless love another name for which is goodness. In the mystic Maugham’s eyes, “[g]oodness is the only value that seems in this world of appearances to be an end in itself. Virtue is its own reward” (*SU*, 181). Goodness, on Maugham’s view, originates in human instincts (*WN*, 50). And “an instinct is an action, resembling one according to a concept of purpose, yet entirely without such concept” (*WWR I*, 161). This disinterestedness of its source rubs off on to goodness. Maugham has more weighty reasons for celebrating goodness as the *summum bonum*:

It may be that in goodness we may see, not a reason for life nor an explanation of it, but an extenuation. In this indifferent universe, with its inevitable evils that surround us from the cradle to the grave, it may serve, not as a challenge or a reply, but as an affirmation of our own independence. It is the retort that humour makes to the tragic absurdity of fate. (*SU*, 182)

The ideas in this pregnant quote need to be unpacked one by one. Goodness has a twofold association with freedom. As Tolstoy argues through Levin, goodness is exempt from the law of causality: “If goodness has its cause, it is not goodness; if it has effect — a reward — again it is not goodness. In other words, goodness is beyond the chain of cause and effect” (*Anna Karenina*, Book Two, 414). This is so because the absolute, the ultimate cause of all that is, is beyond the pale of causality, and so appears to be unpredictable. Accordingly why Maugham’s Salvatore, “just an ordinary fisherman”, should so eminently possess “a native, simple goodness which makes all the gifts of the intellect a little trivial” (*WN*, 142) remains an impenetrable mystery: “Heaven only knows why he should be so strangely and unexpectedly have possessed it” (*Collected Short Stories* 4, 193). Goodness has another association with freedom. To intuit the oneness of all is to transcend the principle of individuation, the creator and sustainer of selfhood, and finally to pierce through the veil of phenomenality. It is to realize through ecstasy one’s identity first with the absolute and then through the absolute with the others. The result is the replacement of egoism by universalism. To perceive one’s essential reality is to shake off all human fetters, to taste absolute freedom. Ecstasy, goodness and right action constitute a logical sequence. Maugham reiterates that “goodness is shown in right action” (*SU*, 182). That right action is selfless action is almost a tautology. Baffled by the difficulty of defining right action in a meaningless world, Maugham quotes Fray de Leon’s aphorism on the issue: “The beauty of life, he says, is nothing but this, that each should act in conformity with his nature and his business” (*SU*, 183). Convinced that man could not go against his grain, Maugham endorses this permissive maxim, and thereby eliminates any prescriptive “ought” from his own ethics.

Dialectical opposites as they are, good and evil preoccupy Maugham in equal measure. Opposing the quibblers over evil’s reality, he bluntly points to its ubiquity: “Evils are there, omnipresent; pain and disease, the death of those we love, crime, sin, frustrated hopes; the list is interminable” (*SU*, 156). His reason for believing in the permanence of evil is that “we are” first “the playthings of nature” and then of our instincts and passions, especially of “the instinct of self-assertion” (*SU*, 168). He also considers evil as inexplicable as good: “There is no explanation for evil. It must be looked upon as a necessary part of the order of the universe” (*SU*, 168). Maybe evil inevitably supervenes upon “the passage from the unity of spiritual to the manifoldness of temporal being” (Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, 190). Evil for Maugham is the mirror image of good, and is



pursued with the same disinterestedness. Captain Nichols in *The Narrow Corner*, for example, “felt just the same satisfaction in the success of a dirty trick as a chess player might in winning a game by a bold and ingenious move” (141). Simon in *Christmas Holiday* speculates that Robert Berger “engaged in crime as a form of sport”, for he pinched the cars “for the fun of the thing, for the pleasure of exercising his audacious cleverness” (160, 163). Larry in *The Razor’s Edge* concludes that Kosti “cheated not so much for the money as for the fun of it” (99). Gratuitous crime as a form of sport is only one of a host of recurrent motifs that interrelate Maugham’s novels. “I should like my complete production”, claims Maugham, “to have something in the nature of a pattern” (“Looking Back” I, 62). Barnes would have one believe that “this is an idea conceived after the fact” (9). To return to Maugham’s delineation of evil as good’s photographic negative. If good denotes human freedom, so does evil. After all, “the genuine sinner embraces evil by his own choice, as a way of asserting his independence” (Stuart Holroyd, 30). Maugham too grants “freedom of action” (*SU*, 29-30) to the artist and to the criminal. Complementary opposites as they are, “the sense of Evil implies the sense of good”; “damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation” (T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 427). Evil is therefore as effective a means of reaching the absolute and attaining self-realization as good. Hence “right action” and “self-realization” are not exactly interchangeable terms.

The theory that the inherited instincts determine the essence of a personality is a form of determinism analogous to predestination. For a person, it is just a toss-up whether he would have a good or a bad heredity. In support of psychological determinism, Maugham quotes Plato’s Athenian stranger to the effect that “every one of us, ... , is made pretty much what he is by the bent of his desires and the nature of his soul” (*SU*, 34). Further one’s habits and ideas make up one’s character as the shaper of one’s actions and reactions (*SU*, 144). And then one gets thoroughly conditioned by the imbibed ethos of one’s family and society. Hence Maugham’s conclusion: “We are the product of our natures and our environment” (*SU*, 173). For all that, he claims to be a compatibilist. He is not wholly a creature of circumstance; he lives up to a point by his preconceived self-image (*SU*, 166). Theoretically, however, he advises “the plain man” “to keep his legs dangling on the side of determinism” (*SU*, 167). However Zola may insist on the distinction between them, Maugham persists in equating fatalism and determinism: “The Maharshi was a fatalist. Philosophers have discussed at length this matter of free will and determination, [...] they appear to believe that we are able to choose

whether we shall take one course rather than another, but having taken it, it was inevitable that we should do so" (*Points of View*, 92). Maugham's equation has its precedent in Schopenhauer's: "Although everything can be regarded as irrevocably predetermined by fate, it is so only by means of the chain of causes" (*WWR I*, 302).

Maugham's life experience being what it is, he has reason enough to be exercised by the phenomenon of chance. First an idea of what chance is is quite in order. In determinism, cause and effect, ground and consequent form an unbroken sequence. It is the knowledge of the cause that helps to identify the corresponding effect. In contrast to all this, chance is "something that happens unpredictably without any discernible human intention or direction and in dissociation from any observable pattern, causal relation, natural necessity, providential dispensation" (*Webster I*, 373). Maugham owes his phenomenal success as a playwright that marks a turning point in his writing career to the inexplicable coincidence of a number of independent events. Attributing this to his "happy fate", he observes that "[a]n accident here, an accident there, might have changed everything and frustrated me...I do not arrogantly ascribe to my merits what has come to me, but to some concatenation of unlikely circumstances for which I can offer no explanation" (*SU*, 169). Conversely a sheer mischance, equally contingent on the conjunction of various imponderables, brings him into contact with Syrie Wellcome whom he ultimately marries with disastrous consequences. With an event like this at the back of his mind, he states: "we all know how greatly changed our lives would have been if we had not by what seems mere chance met such and such a person or if we had not been at a particular moment at a particular place; and so our character, and so our soul, would have been other than what they are" (*WN*, 288). Determinism and causalism, causality and chance would seem to be polar opposites. Maugham himself admits as much when remarks of Tolstoy that "I do not see how he reconciles his conviction of the 'predestined and irresistible necessity' of occurrence with the 'caprices of chance', for when fate comes in at the door, chance flies out of the window" (*Ten Novels*, 312). Nevertheless he seems to blur on other occasions all distinction between "pure chance" and "determinism" (*SU*, 166), "accident" and "fate" (*SU*, 169). It would have been more logical to treat them as another pair of complementary opposites, revealing the opposite facets of the absolute. Be that as it may, determinism and chance reduce man in Maugham's eyes to an object of pity: "Men are passionate, men are weak, men are stupid, men are pitiful; to bring to bear on them anything so tremendous as the wrath of God

seems strangely inept” (*SU*, 158). Conviction of man’s total dependence on the absolute inspires his all-forgiving attitude.

One defining constant of Maugham’s man is polarity; the other is harmony. In an entry in *A Writer’s Notebook* under the year 1922, he records his confusion as a real-life woman challenges his novelist’s ingenuity to weave her contrary traits into a “plausible harmony”: “She is hateful and lovable, covetous and open-handed, cruel and kind, malicious and generous of spirit, egoistic and unselfish. How on earth is a novelist so to combine these incompatible traits as to make the plausible harmony that renders a character credible” (155)? In *The Summing Up* (1938), he registers his amazement at the fact that “the most incongruous traits should exist in the same person and for all that yield a plausible harmony” (33). In *Ten Novels and Their Authors* (1954), he offers one of his most comprehensive definitions of man, which juxtaposes all conceivable opposites:

Man is a jumble of vices and virtues, goodness and badness, of selfishness and unselfishness, of fears of all kinds and the courage to face them, of tendencies and predispositions which lure him this way and that. He is made up of elements so discordant that it is amazing that they can exist together in the individual, and yet so come to terms with one another as to form a plausible harmony. (281)

The same phrase “plausible harmony”, borrowed from Baltasar Gracian (*Selected Prefaces*, 57), recurs in all the three quotations which come from texts composed across many years. Since nothing is fortuitous in Maugham, the recurrence must be intentional. It underlines his thoughtfulness and his intellectual consistency. Maugham’s combination of polarity and harmony in his image of man has ample psychological justification. The instincts which, in Maugham’s view, are the ultimate carriers of all human attributes draw upon the same psychic energy which is a fixed quantity. The more one instinct flourishes, the more the other famishes. When one instinct reaches the dead end, it inevitably topples over into its opposite. The result in either case is inversion. Since all the instincts and intellectual faculties are the constituents of the same personality, they necessarily cohere and complement each other despite all their contrariety:

The libido flows between two opposing poles — an analogy might be drawn here with the diastole and systole of the heart, or a comparison made between the positive and negative poles of an electric circuit. [...] The opposites have a regulating function [...] and when one extreme is reached libido passes over into its opposite. (Fordham, 17-18)

This explains Maugham's systematic use of complementary opposites such as pleasure and pain, love and hate, good and evil. Moreover potential incompatibles can coexist in a state of harmony. They clash on turning actual. In the infinite and eternal Absolute, the antinomies remain perpetually potential. Hence "the peace of the Absolute" (*A Traveller in Romance*, 48). In finite and temporal man, potentialities change into actualities, and so occasion conflicts. For all that, Maugham stresses the shared complexity of man and the Absolute: "Man is so complex, he is a fit symbol of that Absolute which we are told contains all pain and pleasure, change, time and space, in its infinite incomprehensibility" (*WN*, 131).

Just like good and evil, art and love too partake of the Absolute, and so take on its inscrutability. Accordingly Maugham holds that the "creative urge to write [...] is a mystery as impenetrable as the origin of sex" (*Points of View*, 163). "Talent" necessarily appears as "a mysterious gift of nature for which there is no accounting" (*Vagrant Mood*, 56). The unconditioned Absolute's choice of an individual for its medium appears arbitrary from the human point of view. Neither the heredity nor the environment of the ten novelists Maugham studies accounts for their becoming writers at all. Exempt from determinism as ordinarily understood, Maugham's artists are subject to a destiny ordained for them by their Absolute itself. Unable to follow the logic behind this predestination, Maugham confesses "why these faculties should be meted out to one person rather than to another [...] is a mystery which, so far as I know is insoluble" (*Ten Novels*, 339). What makes a man an artist is his innate creative instinct, a natural gift:

The creative instinct, common to all, in a privileged number is vigorous and persistent; neither Byron, with his club-foot, Dostoevsky with his epilepsy, nor Dickens with his unfortunate experience at Hungerford

Stairs, would have become a writer at all unless he had had the urge from the composition of his nature. (*Ten Novels*, 331)

So, Robin Maugham's contention that "it is almost certain that without an impediment in his speech Willie would not have been a writer"(122) does not have much purchase on Maugham's theory about the artist. Maugham, however, concedes that an artist's physical or spiritual disability gives a peculiar tang to his personality.

The collective unconscious, in Maugham's vocabulary "the subconscious", plays in the act of creation a decisive role. Once a writer gets inspired, "out of his unconscious arise thoughts and feelings, characters crowd upon him and events suggest themselves" (*Vagrant Mood*, 172-173). As for the writer's empathy by which he gets into the skin of his characters, sees through their eyes, and feels with their hearts, it is "an action of the subconscious" (*Collected Short Stories* 4, 18). A novelist therefore has to admit that he "owed to his subconscious for the best of what he wrote" (*SU*, 129). All this leads Maugham to conclude that "[t]he author cannot improve himself by a deliberate effort, for as I grow older I am more and more convinced that it is not he that writes but what they call his subconscious, and his aim must be to train and to enrich this in every way he can. This, I think, he can do by taking thought" (*Don Fernando*, 142). Maugham also conceives the subconscious as an automatic synthesizer. For the random notions and impressions "are stored away in the subconscious and emerge when they are needed, sifted, combined, and elaborated, by no effort that I am aware of" (*Don Fernando*, 29). This overwhelming preponderance of the subconscious in artistic creation explains why Maugham always likes things to gestate in his mind for a long time before writing them out (*SU*, 122). For the same reason, he disowns "the journalist's gift of turning out copy hot on the acquisition of a story" (*Strictly Personal*, 117). There is nothing eccentric about Maugham's attribution of creativity to the unconscious. Bernard Shaw, for example, believes that "[t]he unconscious self is the real genius" (*Man and Superman*, 248). When a man brings off an outstanding creative feat, "is it not", asks W.B. Yeats, "because some knowledge or power has come into his mind from beyond his mind" (*Autobiographies*, 272)? This widely shared view of the creative unconscious is, M.H. Abrams points out, just a legacy from the romantics (*The Mirror and the Lamp*, 193). The creative instinct is only the

half, albeit the more important half, on Maugham's view, of the artist's equipment; the other half is personality.

Maugham's expressive theory of art puts a premium on the artist's personality. It is personality, Maugham firmly holds, "that must be combined with the creative instinct to make it possible for a writer to produce a work of value" (*Ten Novels*, 326). This erection of personality into the sole determinant of the artist's worth accords well with Maugham's axiology that all values are human creation. Personal, authentic value-creation is, so to say, the artist's reason for being: "He creates his own values" (*SU*, 112). Since "there are no new subjects", the artist's deliberately developed idiosyncratic personality enables him to "see the old subjects in a personal way" (*A Traveller in Romance*, 94). It follows therefore that a writer's importance ultimately depends on his uniqueness (*Selected Prefaces*, 53). The artist derives his creativity from his innate instinct, his vision from his achieved personality. A work of art thus enshrines both the artist's instinct and his personality: "The artist is driven to produce by an instinct within him that impels him to express his personality" (*Don Fernando*, 118). It is this conception of the artist as the combination of creative artist and the realized personality that explains some of Maugham's apparently contradictory self-observations. His claim that "to write was an instinct that seemed as natural to me as to breathe" would seem to clash with his claim that "I am a made writer" (*SU*, 14 & 48). All inconsistency, however, evaporates if they are seen as the two terms of his ubiquitous dialectic. When he says that "we write because we must" (*SU*, 138), he has in mind the imperative of the creative instinct. When he asserts that "to write well [...] demands arduous study" (*SU*, 143), he is obviously referring to the writer's learning of his craft. Maugham attaches as much importance to the cultivation and enrichment of the artist's personality as to his mastery of style and technique. Unlike the generality of men formed by life, the artist would seem to have some leeway to excavate his self, to "mould his personality" (*The Writer's Point of View*, 19). Any such freedom, however, has very narrow limits, for an artist can only develop on the lines nature has marked out for him (*Vagrant Mood*, 67). Polypsychism is for Maugham a universal human trait. Nevertheless the common run of people may sooner or later succeed in developing an integrate personality. On the contrary, the artist like the saint "never gets the opportunity to grow into a self-consistent, coherent creature" (*SU*, 135).

Maugham's artist belongs with the mystic. What they have in common is spiritual freedom. The artist is so constituted by nature that he can at will withdraw from the workaday world, and give himself over to reverie. It gives him more delight than the pleasure of sense. Above all "it affords him the assurance of his freedom" (*SU*, 49). And then his double role as actor in and spectator of life precludes his total immersion in it, and thus cushions him from its inevitable stress and strain. Even the good things of life find him spiritually impregnable, for they "do not penetrate to his essential aloofness" (*SU*, 102). What, however, contributes most to the artist's spiritual freedom is his capacity to exorcize all his frustrations and traumas by turning them into his raw material. Such is his mental make-up that "[t]he subject that has absorbed him ceases to be a part of him; the emotion that filled him when he was working at it is dead and he cannot by any effort of will recapture it" (*Don Fernando*, 107). From this Maugham concludes that the artist "has by his nature the freedom which the mystic seeks in the repression of desire. He stands aloof" (*Don Fernando*, 95). Pushing the similarity between the two further, Maugham observes that the artist's creative act is as much integrative as the mystic's ecstasy. A work of art vis-à-vis the artists, he continues,

is something like an organic thing that develops, not of course only in their brains, but in their heart, their nerves and their viscera, something that their creative instinct evolves out of the experiences of their soul and their body, and that at last becomes so oppressive that they must rid themselves of it. When this happens they enjoy a sense of liberation and for one delicious moment rest in peace. (*SU*, 109)

The most enthralling of human activities (*SU*, 133), artistic creation "is a spiritual exercise" (*Don Fernando*, 118). A compound of vices and virtues an artist normally is, "but when he comes to produce a work of art it is from the greatness of his tortured soul that he delivers his communication" (*A Traveller in Romance*, 52).

The phenomenon of inspiration offers the strongest proof of the affinity between the artist and the mystic. Inspiration "is a mysterious something", Maugham thinks, "that enables the author to write things that he had no idea he knew". When the author is inspired, Maugham concludes, "ideas, images, comparisons, even solid facts, crowd upon him and he feels himself merely an instrument, a

stenographer, as it were, taking down what is dictated to him” (*Ten Novels*, 330). As the enraptured mystic serves as the conduit of the collective unconscious, so does the inspired artist: “Like the bride of Christ, the artist waits for the illumination that shall bring forth a new spiritual life. He goes about his ordinary vocations with patience; the subconscious does its mysterious business; and then, suddenly springing, you might think from nowhere, the idea is produced” (*SU*, 56). Hence Maugham’s justification for likening inspiration to “the grace of God” (*Vagrant Mood*, 90), the inspired artist to the enraptured mystic:

Is it rash to suggest that when the artist, poet, painter, is mysteriously seized with that curious humour which is known as inspiration, so that notions come to him he cannot tell whence and he finds himself aware of things he never knew he knew, he enjoys a condition indistinguishable from that of the mystic in rapture? (*Vagrant Mood*, 84)

A similar view is held by E.M. Forster, whose “lower personality” is Maugham’s “subconscious”. As Forster’s version of the absolute, “the lower personality” has something in common with all other deeper personalities, and “the mystic will assert that the common quality is God”. As Maugham, so Forster too claims that “[c]reation comes from the depths — the mystic will say from God” (*Two Cheers for Democracy*, 91, 95). One of Maugham’s earliest critics has identified his “subconscious” with Jung’s “collective unconscious”, which “denotes simply the ideal or inspirational plane from which specific inspiration originates”. And “the ‘agent’ is, of course, the writer in his capacity as translator of this inspiration” (R.H. Ward, 16). Now to revert to Maugham’s artist-mystic equation. If the artist is a mystic, Maugham’s dialectic demands that the mystic should be an artist. Accordingly Maugham conceives “Saint Ignatius” as “an artist who forms living souls after his own image. He creates them as the poet creates a poem” (*Don Fernando*, 27). This equation cannot be dismissed as a one-off. For Maugham also turns to St. Teresa to illustrate the artist’s and the mystic’s common subservience to the subconscious:

There are some words of St. Teresa that can hardly fail to echo in the artist’s heart: “I am like one who hears a voice from afar off”, she says, “but although hearing the voice cannot distinguish the words; for at times



I do not understand what I say; yet it is the Lord's pleasure that it should be well said, and if at times I talk nonsense that is because it is natural to me to make a mess of everything. (*Don Fernando*, 142)

As the mystic's kindred spirit, the artist can no more escape the vicissitudes of inspiration and acedia than the mystic can those of union with and separation from the absolute. The phases of the artist's creativity and aridity are, in Maugham's view, like "those of the mystics when, in moments of illumination, they feel themselves at one with the Infinite, and when, in those periods which they call the Dark Night of the Soul, they feel dry, empty and abandoned of God" (*Ten Novels*, 329). Maugham's contention gains in credibility from Jason Brown's recent identification of the common ground between "Mysticism and Creativity" (pp. 365-375).

Love and art divide between them most of Maugham's novels. Complete with a matching theory, one parallels the other. A slight mismatch is that Maugham's principal ideas about art can be culled from both his creative and his discursive writings, but his ideas about love mainly from his creative writings. An idealist since his late youth, Maugham is an out-and-out romantic in his philosophy of love. When he writes that "Love's great subject matter is love, love at first sight, of a devastating kind, which stops at nothing to obtain its satisfaction" (*Don Fernando*, 65), he practically writes about his own love theme. No wonder his characters and his narrators celebrate romantic passion over and over again. Arthur in *Caesar's Wife*, to begin with, approvingly quotes the famous Shakespearean tag: "Whoever loved that loved not at first sight" (*Collected Plays* 3, 87)? The narrator of "The Book-Bag" is all for "love at first sight"; his only rider is that "people may have met twenty times before seeing one another" (*Collected Short Stories* 4, 18). An index of Maugham's enduring interest in the phenomenon of "love at first sight" is that it features in all his novels from the very first to the last. As for its nature, it is fairly indicated by Griffiths, in *Of Human Bondage*, who "had fallen in love" with Mildred "the first moment he saw her; he did not want to love her", "but he could not help himself" (560). As a betrayed lover, Philip acutely intuits that "the sudden passion which had seized the pair of them seemed like something that had come from the outside, as though a god had visited them with it" (*Of Human Bondage*, 572). The idea of romantic love as a kind of divine seizure goes back to Plato, who postulates four kinds of inspiration: "the inspiration of the prophet to Apollo, that of the

mystic to Dionysus, that of the poet to the Muses, and a fourth type which we declared to be the highest, the madness of the lover, to Aphrodite and Eros” (*Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 511). Schopenhauer explains in terms of a biological theory why “great passions arise at the first glance” (*WWR* 2, 551). The species uses, according to him, the sexual instinct to release in a strange pair of man and woman an irresistible passion so as to reduce them to the servile instrument of procreation. The besotted lovers transcend, for the duration of romantic passion, their petty personal selves. Instead they partake of the “infinite life”, “infinite desire, infinite satisfaction, and infinite sufferings” (*WWR* 2, 551) of the species. Love at first sight is indeed an amorous equivalent of ecstasy. Romantic love thus becomes one with religion:

Romantic love is a faith in which we relax and repose, and its appearance is a revelation as overwhelming in its effect as a miracle vouchsafed to us from above. The person feels chosen as the true believer, as if something had borne him away from his griefs and troubles [...] his ego is somewhere else, it has melted and become merged in another person. (Reik, 71)

This is reminiscent of the rhapsody of Maugham’s narrator of “Red”. Love at first sight, he ecstatically declares,

is the real love, not the love that comes from sympathy, common interests, of intellectual community, but love pure and simple. That is the love that Adam felt for Eve when he awoke and found her in the garden gazing at him with dewy eyes. That is the love that draws the beasts to one another, and the Gods. That is the love that makes the world a miracle. That is the love which gives life its pregnant meaning. (*Collected Short Stories* 4, 413)

Fired by the self-transcending romantic passion, Bertha, one of Maugham’s representative lovers, “desired to exist only in Edward, to fuse her character with his and be entirely one with him” (*Mrs. Craddock*, 93). It is this mystical element in romantic love, inhering in a union of two souls that is

claimed to have “the ineffable beauty of the Absolute” (*Collected Short Stories* 4, 418). Love at first sight is then like the inspiration the direct intervention of the noumenon in the phenomenon, of the unconscious in the conscious.

It is the miraculous aspect of romantic love that invests it with an intriguing mystery. Philip rightly considers any reduction of romantic love to the sexual instinct a blatant oversimplification:

He did not know what it was that passed from a man to a woman, from a woman to a man, and made one of them a slave: it was convenient to call it the sexual instinct; but if it was no more than that, he did not understand why it should occasion so vehement an attraction to one person rather than another. (*Of Human Bondage*, 587)

It is not without significance that not a single lover in *Of Human Bondage* knows why he loves the beloved. Stendhal’s tentative answer to a poser like Philip’s is that when a lover discerns his ideal self embodied in someone else, he stumbles upon his beloved. The lover at once and instinctively bedecks the beloved with all conceivable perfection. Stendhal’s name for this action on the lover’s part is “crystallization”, which “recognizes its theme by the disturbance it creates, and consecrates for ever to the master of your destiny what you have dreamt of for so long” (*Love*, 54). It is once again Bertha who, with her “consuming desire to find in Edward the lover of her dreams” (*Mrs. Craddock*, 187), illustrates “crystallization” to a nicety. Theodor Reik seems to add a psychoanalytic gloss on Stendhal’s theory. In his formulation, loving means

exchanging the ego-ideal for an external object, for a person in whom are joined all the qualities that we once desired for ourselves. The unconscious process by which that is done is in the nature of a projection. [...] you can project this ideal image of yourself on to another person. The process relieves the psychical pressure felt by shifting the burden from one’s own shoulders. (41)

Romantic love pushes this projection to the point of deification. For “(w)hen a human being becomes the object of [...] adoration, when the beloved has the power to ‘give light to our lives’ or extinguish

that light, then we have adopted the beloved as the image and symbol of God” (Robert A. Johnson, *The Psychology of Romantic Love*, 55). A paradigmatic romantic lover, Bertha naturally finds an ersatz for her rejected Christian God in her husband: “Edward was again the golden idol, clothed in the diaphanous garments of true love; his word was law and his deeds were perfect; Bertha was a humble worshipper offering incense and devoutly grateful to the deity that forbore to crush her” (*Mrs. Craddock*, 189).

The distinction that Maugham posits between “loving kindness” and “love pure and simple, sexual love” (*SU*, 180) reduces to that between agape and eros. The narrator Maugham in *The Razor’s Edge* dismisses the idea that “there can be love without passion”, but concedes that “there can be desire without love” (161). He views desire as the natural consequence of the sexual instinct. Reik develops the implied difference in terms of “sex” and “love”. “Sex”, he holds, “is an instinct, a biological need, originating in the organism, bound to the body. It is one of the great drives, like hunger and thirst, conditioned by chemical changes within the organism”(19). Physiological in its origin, sex is indiscriminating and easily satiable. With the body and mind as its double provenance, love is on the contrary highly discriminating and not easily satiable. Thus Reik presents sex and love as total opposites:

Sex is passionate interest in another body; love a passionate interest in another personality, or in its life. Sex does not feel pain if its object is injured, nor joy when it is happy. It is possible to possess another person in sex, but not in love. In love you cannot possess another person; you can only belong to another person. You can force another person to sexual activity, but not to love. (21)

Maugham too locates love’s origin in sexual attraction. Nevertheless “it only becomes love when it gives rise to feelings, bitter pains and ecstatic joys” (*Points of View*, 252). As for the paradox of romantic love, passion survives only on obstacle. “Passion is destructive”, for “if it doesn’t destroy it dies” (*The Razor’s Edge*, 162). “Love for its own sake”, confirms De Rougemont, “implies a secret quest of the obstruction that shall foster love” (54). Romantic lovers do not evidently love each other. Rather they use each other to whip up the intense passion they actually crave. Aiming at the ultimate in

intoxication, romantic love sacrifices everybody, subverts everything. That precisely is Philip's lesson of romantic love: "It was irresistible: the mind could not battle with it; friendship, gratitude, interest, had no power beside it" (*Of Human Bondage*, 587). The exact opposite of this romantic love is what Maugham calls "loving-kindness" and others Christian love: "In loving-kindness the sexual instinct is sublimated, but it lends the emotion something of its own warm and vitalizing energy. Loving-kindness is the better part of goodness" (*SU*, 181). Romantic love denies the beloved's autonomous reality and his intrinsic worth; loving-kindness acknowledges both. Romantic love is exploitative; loving-kindness is renunciative. Mildred trades upon Philip's infatuation with her, and enslaves him. Conversely Norah mothers Philip: "above all she loved him because he was he" (*OHB*, 485). The gratuitousness that Maugham attributes to life and art, to good and evil sanctifies Norah's love for Philip. Like good and evil, love and art also have a common source. For "art is a manifestation of the sexual instinct" (*The Moon and Sixpence*, 179). Emanating as they do from the collective unconscious, love and art can, on Maugham's showing, lift their devotees to the absolute.

Maugham's transition from aestheticism to mysticism is gradual rather than abrupt. It takes place at the levels of both style and theme. *The Merry-Go-Round* prefigures Maugham's mysticism; *The Magician* reveals its presence. Examples of Maugham's overtly mystical phraseology in the latter are "man by his union with God had won a spark of divinity" and "the dark night of the soul of which the mystics write" (*The Magician*, 33, 96). "Ecstasy" in the sense of self-transcendence appears approximately in a particular response of Arthur. This matter-of-fact man of science is so moved at the bare mention of his sweetheart that "a curious look came into his eyes as he gazed in front of him. It was the look which might fill the passionate eyes of a mystic when he saw in ecstasy the Divine Lady of his constant prayers" (*The Magician*, 5). It is, however, the beauty-loving aesthete Margaret who goes into an actual ecstasy over works of art. While she visits an art gallery, it is said of Margaret that

Her heart was uplifted from the sordidness of earth, and she had a sensation of freedom which was as delightful as it was indescribable [...] Though beauty meant little to [Arthur's] practical nature, he sought, in his great love for Margaret, to appreciate the works which excited her to such charming ecstasy. (*The Magician*, 47).

It is, however, the novel's ostensible theme of magic that brings in more explicitly the element of mysticism. Both magic and mysticism believe in the reality of the spiritual and in its interpenetration with the material. The magician-hero, Haddo, comes very close to adumbrating this idea when he declares that "[l]ife itself is but a symbol", and that "[m]agic has but one dogma, namely, that the seen is the measure of the unseen" (*The Magician*, 34). Belief in this "correspondence between appearance and reality, the microcosm of man and the macrocosm of the universe" "plays a great part in the theory of mysticism" (Underhill, 159). Both the magician and the mystic strive hard to integrate the conscious and the unconscious and to fortify the will. They, however pursue directly opposite goals: the mystic dreams of uniting with God, the magician of rivaling God. Accordingly Haddo states that "[p]ower was the subject of all his dreams, [...] power over God himself" (*The Magician*, 81). Magic and mysticism thus "represent as a matter of fact the opposite poles of the same thing: the transcendental consciousness of humanity" (Underhill, 70).

At the novel's beginning, Arthur is a passionate lover but a cocksure rationalist. He pooh-poohs magic, and upholds a "reasonable theory of the universe" (*The Magician*, 35-38). As things pan out, they close all his legitimate options of saving Margaret from Haddo's clutches. In sheer desperation, he has recourse, of all things, to magic. As a disabused rationalist, he confesses that "deep down in all of us, a relic from the long past, is the remains of the superstition that blinded our fathers; and it is needful for the man of science to fight against it with all his might. And yet it was stronger than I" (*The Magician*, 201). It is this presentation of the unconscious as irresistible that heralds Maugham's mysticism. Moreover Miss Ley (of *The Merry-Go-Round*) and Arthur cling in default of anything better to "superstition". This perhaps pushes to a term Maugham's search for a secular eschatology through mysticism. Arguably Maugham enters through the portals of magic, a negative form of mysticism, the edifice of mysticism proper. As he moves on from aestheticism to mysticism, he advances from individualism to universalism. Similarly he subordinates beauty to goodness.

Such is Maugham's spiritual restlessness that he seems ultimately to drift even from mysticism towards a kind of mysterianism. He firmly believes that "no one of the faiths that men have embraced is ample enough to account for the enormous mystery" (*Don Fernando*, 125). He cannot identify definitely the final arbiter of human destiny. So he lumps together "God, fate, chance", and calls them

“the mystery that governs men’s lives” (*Ten Novels*, 108). He treats “the existence of the universe as an enigma”. As for the object of the evolutionary process, it remains “as dark to me as it ever was” (*WN*, 287). His agnosticism about these ultimates naturally rubs off on the origins of love and art, on good and evil. Despite his long spell of mysticism, he has to admit that the mystic fares no better than the sceptic, for both agree that “at the end of all our intellectual efforts there remains a great mystery” (*SU*, 160). In his last two novels, *Then and Now* and *Catalina*, Maugham conjures up a Catholic ethos, and shows actual miracles dissolving all dichotomies. Nevertheless he thoroughly exposes the glaring lapses of the Catholic Church. So Maugham’s spiritual biography ends on a note of enigma.

Maugham’s novels, meant for the lonely reader, are generally richer in ideas than his plays, designed to entertain a mass audience. The off-spring of reason, thought is a private thing. The lonely reader is much better placed for its reception than the member of a mass audience. As reason appeals to reason, so instinct appeals to emotion. Hence Maugham concludes that “the appeal of the drama is to the emotions rather than to the intellect” (Preface, *Collected Plays I*, xvi). He is not of course for the wholesale exclusion of all ideas from the drama. The ideas to which a theatre audience can respond are “those commonplace, fundamental ideas that are almost feelings. These, the root ideas of poetry, are love, death and the destiny of man” (*SU*, 78). But the subject of the great novels, as Maugham identifies them, are not essentially different from the root ideas of poetry and drama. The great novelists “deal with the subjects of enduring concern to mankind: God, love and hate, death, money, ambition, envy, pride, good and evil; in short, with the passions and instincts common to all from the beginning of time” (*Ten Novels*, 337). Very little that is startlingly new can be said about these perennial issues. So Maugham plays down the novelists’ intellectual acumen, but stresses their capacity to feel even ideas passionately:

They accept the commonplaces of the philosophy current in their day, and when they put them in use in their fiction, the result is seldom happy. The fact is, ideas are not their affair, and their concern with them, when they are concerned with them, is emotional. They have little gift for conceptual thought. (*Ten Novels*, 328)

It comes therefore as no surprise that his own forte is not to see things with great subtlety but to feel them with intensity: “It interests me”, he confesses, “to translate into words not the look of them, but the emotion they have given me” (*The Gentleman*, 130).

The exposition of Maugham’s evolving philosophy in the foregoing must not create the misleading impression that he is primarily interested in directly propagating his ideas. Passionately concerned with ideas he certainly is; yet he is the very reverse of a novelist of ideas. A fanatical admirer of Proust, he still looks askance at his theories and ideas for their inherent tendency towards obsolescence. No less revealing is his dismissal of Wells’s novels: “Wells’s principal novels were designed to diffuse certain doctrines and principles; and that is propaganda” (*Ten Novels*, 7). For Maugham ideas are nothing more than just raw material. They are transmuted into the characters’ lived experience, embodied in the relationships between them, in events and settings. So complete is the transformation of the ideas into images that they often go unnoticed. Maugham’s novels derive their intellectual coherence and taut structure from the systematic working out of ideas. Here too the concrete predominates over the abstract. What he says about his model novelist’s plot-pattern applies to his own: “When he succeeds he has forced you for a time to accept his view of the universe and has given you the pleasure of following out the pattern he has drawn on the surface of chaos. But he seeks to prove nothing. He paints a picture and sets it before you. You can take it or leave it” (*Selected Prefaces*, 61). Marking off the philosophical novelists from the thesis writers, Camus observes that

the preferences they have shown for writing in images rather than in reasoned arguments is revelatory of a certain thought that is common to them all, convinced of the uselessness of any principle of explanation and sure of the educative message of perceptible appearance. (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 92-93)

It may not be an exaggeration to claim that Maugham approximates to Camus’s idea of a philosophical novelist.

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